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ABSTRACT

The research reported in this paper explored student attitudes about how the educational process could help improve man-woman relationships. A questionnaire was administered to 40 female and 73 male black students enrolled in psychology courses at Morehouse College. In addition, 100 black students in the Atlanta University Center also answered the question: "What can be taught or done in high school or college to improve man-woman relationships?" Students recommended classes on man-woman relationships, on interpersonal communication, on human sexuality, and on self understanding. They favored more opportunities for discussing these topics at both the high school and college levels, and suggested more extracurricular activities to bring both sexes together. (Author/AM)

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# Close Man-Woman Relationships and the Educational Process

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Abstract. Over 200 black college students responded to the question, "What can be taught or done in high school or college to improve man-woman relationships?" Students recommended classes on man-woman relationships, on interpersonal communication, on human sexuality, and on self understanding, favored more opportunities for discussing these topics at both the high schol and college levels, and suggested more extracurricular activities bringing both sexes together. The statement that "The missing element in our educational system is education for life itself." was endorsed by 89% of the students.

Until recent years close man-woman relationships were not viewed as an area for respectable, scientific study (Murstein, 1971). Even in this scientific age, many people feel that intimate relationships should remain a mystery, and any attempt to gain insight into them would result in their destruction. On the one hand the unrealistic optimism oozing out of publications such as Brides Magazine suggests that sustaining love requires little effort, while on the other hand many men's and women's magazines (Playboy, Cosmopolitan, etc.) perpetuate manipulative practices and unrealistic ideas which undermine the formation of close, enduring relationshps. Given the background, the failure of such a large percentage of intimate relationships becomes more understandable. Mace and Mace (1974) feel that the present remedial system in which couples admit to needing help only after their situation has become desperate should be replaced by a preventive approach. In South Australia one-fifth of all couples participate in experimental premarital discussion groups. Following this effective model could be a first step in developing a preventive framework. More importantly, close man-woman relationships could be improved through relevant instruction within our educational institutions.

Crosby (1973) states that "The emphasis on the socialization process is . . . . the key to the future of human happiness, including marital and familial happiness. The difficulty implicit in this concept is that it is neither strikingly bold nor brilliantly utopian." Crosby reports positive gains from family life education courses in which the learning of communication techniques and conflict resolution procedures improved interpersonal relationships.

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Rosenman (1976) takes the position that the educational establishment and our society could meet the challenge of improving man-woman relationships. Skills for more effective interpersonal communication can be taught (Becvar, 1974). A better understanding of procedures for producing feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance in young people can be developed. Crosby (1973) observes that although many Americans pride themselves on our educational system, with its emphasis on achievement, accomplishment, and excellence, the missing element is education for life itself. "A teacher should", Crosby writes, "be proficient in teaching the academic disciplines peculiar to third grade or tenth grade, and in addition, should be able to become a 'growth facilitator' in the area of feelings and self-concept."

The current research explored student attitudes on how the educational process could help improve man-woman relationships.

## METHOD

A questionnaire was administered to 40 female and 73 male black students in psychology courses at Morehouse College. Around 100 additional black students in the Atlanta University Center also answered the question "What can be taught or done in high school or college to improve man-woman relationships?"

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A frequency distribution for the 114 students on six objective questions is presented below.

My attitudes on man-woman relationships have changed:
During college.
Strongly Disagree 13 Disagree 21 Agree 46 Strongly Agree 34
During high school.
Strongly Disagree 12 Disagree 44 Agree 46 Strongly Agree 12

Skills for more effective interpersonal communication should be taught in:
elementary school.
Strongly Disagree 8 Disagree 24 Agree 54 Strongly Agree 28
high school.
Strongly Disagree 4 Disagree 2 Agree 48 Strongly Agree 60
college.
Strongly Disagree 8 Disagree 6 Agree 40 Strongly Agree 60

The missing element in our educational system is education for life itself.
Strongly Disagree 2 Disagree 10 Agree 49 Strongly Agree 53

The responses to the above questions, and to open-ended questions, indicate that students view the educational process as a potential way for favorably shaping attitudes on man-woman relationships. Most students reported that their attitudes on man-woman relationships had changed during college, and a smaller majority acknowledged changes during high school. There was a very strong support for teaching skills for interpersonal communication in high school and college, and moderate support for teaching these skills in elementary school. Eighty-nine percent of the students agreed that "The missing element in our educational system is education for life itself."

The vast majority of the responses to the question, "What can be taught or done in high school or college to improve man-woman relationships?", suggested that educational intervention was desirable. Students recommended classes on man-woman relationships, interpersonal communication, human sexuality, and self understanding, as well as more opportunities for discussing these topics, at both the high school and college levels. It was generally felt that more extracurricular activities bringing both sexes together would be beneficial.

Presented below are verbatim responses from five students.

> First of all, I think the educational establishment should require some type of seminar on man-woman relationships from grade 1 on up through college. Obviously, such courses in the earlier grades would deal with simple basic issues. In grades 1 through 4 issues such as the following should be discussed: (1) The importance of being nice to people and what nice things will happen to you for being nice. (2) Not being selfish. (3) The advantages of sharing things you have with other people. (4) Feelings of love towards parents and awareness of how much parents have done for them. (5) Importance of honesty and respect. (6) Why you shouldn't put other people down: because they may not have as much as you or they may look a little different.
>
> From the 5th grade on up to the 9th, more emphasis should be put on the actual relationships of men and women. It should be well explained why men and women are attracted to each other. They should be made to understand problems that evolve from such relationships and how to cope with them. From the 10th on through college, such courses should be offered that would instill real values into these individuals. They should have a full understanding of what society expects of such relationships and how to think for themselves in terms of their own expectations. Sexual relationships should be fully explained and students should be taught to differentiate physical attraction from mental attraction. A great emphasis should also be put on the marriage institution--its advantages, disadvantages, possible consequences, and the myths which have been attached to it.

Our educational establishment has outdated ideas about man-woman relationships. From the time you enter school you are constantly hearing the same old phrases. Like: "And they were married and lived happily ever after." Our teachers and administrators hide so much of the so-called dirt that we must decide at a very early age whether to believe the fairy tales that our educational system sets up or believe what our peers say.

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I strongly believe that the emphasis on man-woman relationshps is taken far too lightly when teaching it to children. As I remember from my 8th grade health class, the class spent more time snickering and giggling than they did actually learning about women's sexual anatomy. From this class, I carried from then on a rather immature attitude about how a man and a woman show love for one another. Now, I believe that if the schools first attempted to teach about relationships, if they placed an emphasis on the intimacy of such relationships, then this would go a long way towards eliminating games that are played between mates. Small encounter groups such as the relationships class are perfect at stripping naked the biased, groundless views that mates have about one another. If we started at an earlier age, the topics could be less complicated and the experiences far more limited, but the exposure to self-actualization of sexual beliefs, myths, and taboos would be invaluable. Then as the teenagers grew older, still participating in these types of class sessions, by the time one gets to college, classes such as ours would be far more open. After years of this type of class orientation, intimacy would be a natural characteristic with mates and openness between partners would be a standard. Of course, this method would meet with much disapproval among the incumbent educational powers that be. But this type of shock treatment is what is needed to bring intimacy education into the limelight where it needs to be. It will eliminate the high school puppy loves and freshman broken hearts. It is highly idealistic, but remember, years ago orgasm was a taboo to speak about in public places. Now the word orgasm is used as widely as the pill.

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It is my belief that the institutions of higher learning can do a great deal to improve the man-woman

partnerships here in America. Our educational institutions should begin in the secondary school levels to implement policies as far as memebers of the opposite sex are concerned. In the high school and college as well, this would be classes that involve the relationships couples have with one another. There should be more man-woman exchange instead of the normal locker room man-to-man rap. Discussion between the sexes would enhance the possibilities of a better man-woman relationship. The educational system should treat their students on a more mature level and help them to find their own identities as to men and women. Counseling centers, family planning services, and help in dealing with actual social problems would greatly help college students.

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I've always felt that there is entirely too little knowledge about methods for carrying out and sustaining good relationships. Most people take this too lightly and start out very young with the idea that as long as they can do it in bed, there is nothing else to be concerned with. I have a strong conviction that most people who never learn about having a relationship with aspects other than sex often never have a complete or lasting marriage. This may be because once a problem arises, whether it be sexual or otherwise, the couple is usually not mentally or emotionally capable of dealing with the situation. To aid or eliminate these types of problems in the beginning, I feel the educational system nationwide should establish courses in Core Curriculum such as health seminars to learn more about our bodies, man-woman relationship type courses with a discussion group rather than the traditional class lecture format, and other opportunities to talk openly and honestly about man-woman relationships and specific examples with friends and/or intimates. I feel that the administration could do much to improve man-woman relationships on college campuses. Coed living is one vital step toward improving these relations. Through coeducational living, students evolve more of a responsibility and respect for each other. Perhaps each sex would find out what the other one is really like. By living together, working together, and being together, the students would be able to grow together. This may enable them to build a more firm foundation in dealing with the opposite sex which could be useful in future relationships.

Another useful measure might be more classes like Relationships Between the Sexes. Perhaps this should even be a mandatory part of each student's curriculum.

Classes, which give students a chance to broaden their views about the opposite sex, can change some of the myths which have developed. This sort of class also gives the student a chance to express himself, to ask questions, to think, and to hear opposing ideas.

Coeducational sports would be another way to improve man-woman relationships. Mixed teams would help to create a more peaceful and cohesive atmosphere.

Lastly, if the administration does not find coed living a feasible possibility, then perhaps coed clubs would be another answer. This way men and women could develop new interests while learning from each other. This, like coed sports, may enhance student's ability to get to know each other more intimately.

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As cited earlier in this report, 89% of the student sample endorsed the statement that "The missing element in our educational system is education for life itself." Both through courses and through humanistic teaching techniques our educational system could help teach children and adults about human relationships and interaction. There should be concern about the development of self concept in individuals. Although learning self-acceptance and self-esteem begins early in childhood, teachers usually underestimate their potential for shaping their students' self-concepts. Education usually focuses on disbursing academic knowledge rather than knowledge of people. Yet a curriculum which would be a vehicle for increased understanding of self and others could be designed. A feasible, major, first step for achieving this objective is given in the following statement by Carl Rogers, one of America's most distinguished psychotherapists.

"One of the elements which stands out for me, in so many of the marriages described in this book and in other marriages I have known," writes Carl Rogers in Becoming Partners: Marriage and its Alternatives, "is that young people start out without the foggiest notion of how to live in human, personal interaction--literally without any experience in real interpersonal sharing communication with persons. Sometimes I feel our education has as one of its major goals the bringing up of individuals to live in isolation cages.

So, in moments of bemused thinking, I wonder if it would truly be too much to ask of our educational system that it include one new goal, in addition to those they have defined so intellectually, so precisely. I wonder if they would be willing not only to believe, but to prove by their actions that one goal of education is to assist the young person to live as a person with other persons.

It seems to me a modest hope, in some ways. It would not require vast new expenditures, new building, added teaching staff. It would simply mean that we would need a changed attitude in teachers, a changed climate in classrooms, a changed attitude--perhaps the most difficult to achieve--in school administrators.

If all elementary, high school, and college personnel could simply recognize and accept the fact that they are fallible persons dealing with fallible persons, our educational system would be revolutionized overnight. If they could recognize that human interaction is something that will go on through their students' lives, then they might be willing to include a real and open and sharing communication as part of the educational experience. This would be an enormous start, a beginning preparation for living in a world of people."

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